# Research Proposal

## Re-negotiating Diasporic Identities in the Selected Fictional Writings of Bharti Kirchner, Jhumpa Lahiri and Monica Ali

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## I. Tentative Title

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## II. Research Problem

Etymologically, the term 'Diaspora' is derived from the Greek term, 'diasperien' wherein 'dia' means 'across' and 'sperien' means 'to sow or scatter seeds'. It is based on the Hebrew word for diaspora, 'galut' meaning 'exile' (i.e. from the Holy Land). The term 'diaspora' originally took on its meaning by reference to a homeland which defined the identity of an ethnic community. For example, the Jewish diaspora comprises all the Jews living in countries outside of Israel; the Chinese diaspora, of all the Chinese living outside of China, and so on. However, empirical evidence shows that the attraction of the homeland varies with different categories of the diaspora population. The term diaspora literally means an ambiguous status of being both an ambassador and a refugee.

Dispersion, going away from the native location and departure from the cultural context are among the the main thematic concerns of diaspora writers. Diaspora brings to mind various contested ideas and images. It can be a positive site to build up an identity, or, a negative site of a fear of losing that identity. It deals with multiple mixtures of cultures, languages, histories, people, places, and times. It does not only mean that people are dispersed in different places but that they also congregate in other places, forming new communities. In such gatherings, a new kind of culture and consciousness is formed to add to the

remaining culture. New imagined communities arise and do not simply substitute old ones but form a new community which we know today as the 'New Diaspora'.

Implicitly, the term includes the loss of inheritance along with a confident sense of ability to project one's native culture outside the native context. One could go back to the seventies that witnessed the emigration of engineering and medical graduates, later came the IT professionals clustering the Silicon Valley and now one can see the effects of globalization from the nineties onwards - the decade that witnessed a subtle change from expatriate to diaspora, and accordingly moved from the politics of exile to hyphenated identities and 'translated men'. Even if we move away from the origin of the Jewish diaspora, we find that the South Asians have, over the years, acquired a multiplicity - the indentured labour, the early migrants in search of trade, adventure or prosperity and the professionals. History tells us that these different phases overlap. All of them are diaspora, many of them are slaves in one sense. In addition, there is also the specificity of political history between any 'host' and 'home' culture.

Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands* (1991) is often cited in the quest for 'home'. It is an issue which is problematic for almost all immigrants: how long can one remain a foreigner and not take root? What is home? Is home a geographical space, a historical space, an emotional, sensory space? Home, nation, country and abroad - each one of them reflects the change that is happening both in the emotional world and in the socio-political world. A term which is now being applied to reflect this change is 'hybridity'. It indicates the simultaneous occupation of the same space by two cultures.

Though there are many opportunities while working abroad, the South Asian immigrants feel the need to maintain ties with the motherland. Physical proximity to the family as well as to the nation and an independent environment have been

reported as the most important positive feelings. An emigrant who goes through the process of leaving the motherland eventually succeeds to adjust in the foreign land but always longs for the homeland. Finding one's own identity in an exiled place is difficult; the dilemma that emigrants face in adopting the new culture makes them insecure and vulnerable.

In my thesis, I propose to analyze selected fictional works (novels and short stories) by Bharti Kirchner, Jhumpa Lahiri and Monica Ali. I will explore how these writers portray the trauma of migration in their narratives and will examine the manner in which they interweave memories with their past and have their characters experience a sense of dual identity, as perhaps they do too. While Lahiri's 2006 novel *The Lowland* (2013) and the anthology of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) will be taken up for study, Ali's novel *Brick Lane* (2004) and the short-story collection entitled *Alentejo Blue* (2006) will be examined in detail for the issues they throw up alongside the novels of Bharti Kirchner, namely *Shiva Dancing (1998)* and *Darjeeling (2002)* to examine their literary representation in fiction.

The questions I will thus investigate are: For how long do the immigrants have to suffer the pain of migration? How do the migrants deal with the question of diasporic consciousness? Is the impact of migration today the same as in the earlier times? What is the role of geographical boundaries in transforming identity? How can 'home' be re-conceptualized? Do the migrants really need to develop their own cocoon in a foreign land or is their insecurity and vulnerability only imaginary? How are the migrants converging their cultural identity into a transnational one? How do women characters view their plight, as presented in the works selected as primary reading? The first-generation retains a close link to their motherland, but what about the second-generation? What relationship should they

have with their country of origin? What do they owe to their motherland, if anything at all?

I, therefore, hypothesize that though there is a visible fatigue in dislocation and an impossible mourning goes on in the life of immigrants, Diaspora writing cannot only be looked through the pangs of separation, loss of identity, rootlessness and trauma of the first generation but needs to be approached as opening the portals to view the new change in the life of migrants of the second generation whose transformation may be seen clearly in their acculturated identities with a reconciliation between and assimilation of two very different cultures

In testing the hypothesis, the selected writings of Kirchner, Lahiri will be analysed for socio-cultural and psychological implications of migration in the context of literature produced by these diaspora writers. The study will include a close reading of the primary works of the authors that directly contribute to their views on migration and mobile identities, and referring to secondary sources incorporating critical studies on the related areas of study.

## III. Definition of Terms

- **Acculturation**: Acculturation is often tied to political conquest or expansion, and is applied to the process of change in beliefs or traditional practices that occurs when the cultural system of one group displaces that of another.
- **Alienation**:This concept wasfirst introduced by Marx and since used in a variety of contexts.

It means the separation of the individual from important aspects ofthe e xternal worldaccompanied by a feeling of powerlessness or lack of con trol. A person may feel alienatedfrom themselves or from society.

- **Ambivalence**: The idea of ambivalence sees culture as consisting of opposing perceptions and dimensions. Bhabha claims that this ambivalence—this duality that presents a split in the identity of the colonized other—allows for beings who are a hybrid of their own cultural identity and the colonizer's cultural identity.
- **DissemiNation**: The term was coined by Homi Bhabha. 'Dissemi Nation', with the letter 'N' capitalized is to indicate that it is not merely an individual immigrant who gets dispersed or dislocated but the socio-historical construct of 'Nation' too.

- **Home**: Home and dislocation have appeared again and again as the central themes in the writings of diaspora writers. Diasporic experience often comes from memory— a memory of loss, of leaving the home, of not having any soul-connection with the host country, and thus diaspora literature always acts as a kind of bridge between two different cultures. It is an extended form of return.

- **Hybridity:** Hybridity is fundamentally associated with the emergence of post-colonial discourse and its critiques of cultural imperialism. It is characterized by literature and theory that study the effects of mixture (hybridity) upon identity and culture. The principal theorists of hybridity are Homi Bhabha, Néstor García Canclini, Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak, and Paul Gilroy, whose works respond to the multi-cultural awareness that emerged in the early 1990s. In the

theoretic development of hybridity, the key text is Bhabha's *The Location…* wherein the liminality of hybridity is presented as a paradigm of colonial anxiety.

- **Memory**: Memory is both process and raw material; process as it covers many journeys back and forth as a new subjectivity is defined, as relationships are reviewed and very often cleansed of bitterness and regret and the raw material as it is the only reality which has been experienced either first hand or through ancestors. It is an act of remembrance- an act which is simultaneously a process of self-analysis, self- discovery and relocation.

- **Multiculturalism:** Multiculturalism is closely associated with identity politics, the politics of difference, and the politics of recognition, all of which share a commitment to revaluing disrespected identities and changing dominant patterns of representation and communication that marginalize certain groups. It is also a matter of economic interests and political power; it demands remedies to economic and political disadvantages that people suffer as a result of their minority status.

- **Third Space**: The Third Space acts as an ambiguous area that develops when two or more individuals/cultures interact. It challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary past, kept alive in the national tradition of the people.
- **Transculturation:** Transculturation is a term coined by the Cuban anthropologist, Fernando Ortiz, in 1947 to describe the phenomenon of merging and converging cultures. It encompasses more than

transition from one culture to another; it does not consist merely of acquiring another culture (acculturation) or of losing or uprooting a previous culture (deculturation). Rather, it merges these concepts and additionally carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena (neoculturation).

- **Transnationalism**: According to Linda.G. Basch et.al.(1994), transnationalism entails a process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement.

## IV. Background

The first migrant Indian to write and publish a book in the English language was Deen Mohammad. Published in Ireland in 1794, the book was called *The Travels of Deen Mahomet, A Native of Patna in Bengal Through Several Parts of India While in the Service of the Honourable East India Company, Written by Himself in a Series of Letters to a Friend.* He was also the first South Asian to set up a *desi* food business in Europe – called the 'Hindustanee Coffee House' located in the posh Portman Square in the heart of London. Mohammad sailed into Ireland's Cork Harbour in 1784 at age 25, and never saw his homeland again, passing the rest of his life in the British Isles.

From the 19th century onwards and until the end of the British Raj, much of the migration was involuntary in the form of export of labour to other colonies under the indenture system. During the partition of India, there was a lot of migration between India and Pakistan of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. A similar migration took place in 1971 between Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. After 1947, the pattern of migration naturally changed. To seek a better future and economic opportunities, Indians migrated at first to the UK and later to the USA and

Australia. After the 1970s oil boom in the Middle East, a large number of Indians emigrated to the Gulf countries. Over the years, migration has taken place due to historical, political and economic reasons including higher education, better prospects and marriage. Vijay Mishra (2007) divides this widespread Indian diaspora into two categories – the Old and the New Diaspora. He further explores that whether 'old' or 'new', they are all forced to undergo some kind of hyphenation, racialization, exclusion, and subalterization as they find themselves in a new culture. Through historical evidence, we see that diaspora literature is located between cultures, between majority and minority, nation and non-nation, citizen and foreigner, original and hybrid, self and other. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha answers the question: where is culture located? The main thrust being that it needs to be dislocated from assumed positions. The diaspora's relationship with the homeland is very varied and complex.

The initial works by the diaspora writers were autobiographical and focussed on issues like nostalgia, rootlessness, homelessness, dislocation and displacement. There are two moves that characterize the diasporic writer; first, the Temporal move, i.e. looking backwards to the past and looking forward to the future. This move results in a mood of nostalgia coupled with the themes of survival and cultural assimilation; second, the spatial move which involves a de-territorializaton and re-territorialization connected by journey. There is a loss of territory - geographical and cultural - and the gain of a new territory. So, diaspora fiction deals with space, the move between 'home' and 'foreign' country, between the 'familiar' and the 'strange'. The contrasts and comparisons between these two geographical cultural spaces are frequent in the diaspora novels.

South Asian diaspora writing has a worldwide context and includes writers of both old and new generations who have left India and settled abroad. Some of the

most prominent names from the older generation are Kamala Markandaya, Santha Rama Rau, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, V.S. Naipual, Amitav Ghosh and A.K. Ramanujan. Other diaspora writers who have gone over to Canada and settled there belong to the younger generation. Tilottama Rajan, Uma Parameswaran, Ashish Gupta, Rohinton Mistry, Neil Bissoodnath, and M.G. Vassanji, Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni, Meena Alexander and Jhumpa Lahiri, too are to be mentioned in this connection.

The diaspora writers of today are settled abroad in different countries (viz. U.K., U.S.A., Canada, Australia and the West Indies) thus belong to both the younger and the older generations. Their writings bring to the fore their awareness of geographical dislocations, cultural ambivalence, social and political alienation and the absence of centrality. Memory and nostalgia connect them with their homeland and past associations thereby feeding their imagination to churn out something 'new and strange' in their writings. In fact, the migrated South Asian community has shown a greater sense of adjustment, adaptability, mobility and accessibility. The situation today is that the Indian diasporas are a well-known success story in the U.K., U.S.A. and across Europe. The South Asian diaspora community today is a multicultural, hybrid and powerful entity, and no longer subscribes to the once characteristic features of diaspora writing such as the quest for identity, uprooting and re-rooting, insider and outsider syndrome, nostalgia, a nagging sense of guilt, etc. Today, the diaspora writers turn to their homeland for various reasons. For example, while V.S. Naipaul is in a perpetual quest for his roots when he turns to India, Rushdie visits India to mythologise its history. While Rohinton Mistry visits and re-visits India for a kind of re-vitalization and to re-energize his aching soul, Bharati Mukherjee's childhood memories harken her time and again.

All the same, it is necessary to realize the importance of the cultural encounter, the bicultural pulls which finally help in the emergence of a new culture. Diaspora writings - that have contributed to giving us the 'theory of migrancy'- help towards an aesthetic evaluation, negotiation with cultural constructs and in aiding the emergence of a new hybridity. Diasporas also have a multiplicity of origins and locations. In this regard, memory is central to all kinds of writing but to the writing of diaspora , it is much more central. One could problematize 'memory' in highly philosophical terms, as Bharti Kirchner, Jhumpa Lahiri and Monica Ali explore in their novels and short-story collections, and whose works are the subject of this proposed research work.

Jhumpa Lahiri (Nilanjana Sudeshna) was born on July 11, 1967, in London to Bengali parents. She published her debut short-story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* in 1999, winning the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Hemingway Award. She followed it up in 2003 with her first novel, *The Namesake* (also a film by the same name), and returned to short stories with the No. 1 *New York Times* best-seller *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). Lahiri's 2013 novel, *The Lowland*, was partially inspired by real-world political events.

Monica Ali (born 20 October 1967) is a Bangladeshi-born British writer and novelist whose Bangladeshi father and English mother moved to Bolton, England, when she was three. In 2003, Ali was selected as one of the "Best of Young British Novelists" by *Granta* magazine based on her unpublished manuscript; her debut novel, *Brick Lane,* was published later that year. It was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and was adapted as a 2007 film by the same name. She has also published three other novels.

Bharati Kirchner( born 01 June 1940 in Kolkata) is an Indian American author who – though an engineer by profession - toyed with the idea of writing fiction and produced *Shiva Dancing* (1998), *Sharmila's Book* (1999), *Darjeeling* (2002), and *Pastries* (2003). It is with a sense of nostalgia that she looks backwards (to her past in India) and forward to the USA (her adopted country). Swinging between the two worlds, her characters do not seem to find their place either in the land of their birth or adoption. Kirchner has won several prestigious awards and grants and has also been honoured as a Living Pioneer Asian American Author.

## V. Review of Literature

A constant concern of Diasporic writers is a search for identity and dealing with the problems of rootlessness and dislocation. For instance, many of V.S. Naipaul's fictional figures remain unhoused, displaced, uprooted, with no distinct place called 'home'. K. C. Sharma in his book *V.S. Naipaul: A Literary Criticism* points out that in formal terms, Naipaul experiments along the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction - in particular, travel writing - and often gives birth to new ones. Naipaul has written extensively about different aspects of a post-colonial society but, knowingly or unknowingly, whether writing a travellogue or a novel, he tends to end up dealing with an identity crisis faced by his characters, their sense of alienation and the pangs of exile experienced by them. He thus addresses the problem of alienation, exile and displacement in his novels.

In the article entitled "The Lane, Brick by Brick: Practices of Identity Formation of the Bengali Diaspora in London", Gurupdesh Singh has examined how diaspora writing draws our attention to an important aspect of the post-modern condition in which responsibilities go across national boundaries. The

earlier modernist notions of centre and margin, home and exile, familiar and strange are falling apart. Citizens are no longer the victims of post-colonialism or a nation's partition. Diaspora writing thus opens the portals of transformation and hope with regard to cultural identity.

Renuka Singh in her essay 'Indian Diaspora and Creativity' discusses how migrants and their descendents constitute minorities in the countries of their settlement. It is observed that the diaspora community was largely nostalgic and sentimental. The central point in the essay, however, is 'the connection between the experience of freedom in voluntary or involuntary exile and one's creative outpouring.

Another essay that illuminates our knowledge on the shifting of the gaze in examining the meaning of diaspora is 'Home is where your feet are, and may your heart be there too!'' by Uma Parameswaran. In this essay, Parameswaran brings out the static quality which nostalgia confers upon the culture and the manner in which self-imposed ghettoization interrupts the process of acceptance of and by the host culture. But neither dislocation nor absorption can be completely achieved. Writers tend to focus on the pain of discrimination and alienation, because "our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought".

Sudesh Mishra in his essay "From Sugar to Masala: Writing by the Indian diaspora" divides the Indian diaspora into two categories- the old and the new. He writes, "The distinction is between, on the one hand, the semi-voluntary flight of indentured peasants to non- metropolitan plantation colonies such as Fiji, Trinidad, Mauritius, South Africa, Malaysia, Surinam and Guyana, roughly between the years 1830 and 1971; and other, the late capital or postmodern dispersal of new migrants of all classes to thriving metropolitan centres such as Australia, the United States, Canada and Britain". (56)

Robin Cohen suggests that the old diasporic practice of sojourning has become a feature of the new global economy. Diaspora, today, illustrates the hybrid and ever-changing nature of identities that are no more dependent on homogeneity, purity and stable localization. The concept of diaspora thus becomes the best way of understanding the present day world in which the idea of ethnicity is rapidly fading and the binary process of 'travel from' and 'return to' is no longer useful and valid. Global media and communications play a vital role in the flow of cultural phenomena and the transformation of diasporic identity.

Bhabha in the chapter entitled 'Dissemi Nation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation' (from *The Location*…) describes location as the concept of identity not limited by geographical limits but something that is constituted regardless of the specific location. He questions the idea of nation and nationalism, exposing its instability. He maintains that nation is only a historical construction and what existed or exists is only nation less.

In other words, looking at diaspora literature in a broader perspective, it is seen that such literature has helped in understanding various cultures, breaking the barriers between countries, globalizing and facilitating mutual understanding. Good fiction embellishes facts and adds interesting layers to hold the readers' attention and makes people aware of the contemporary society. Diaspora writing raises questions regarding the definitions of 'home' and 'nation'. Literature, as a product of culture, thus becomes the source by which we come to know about the local and the global.

## VI. Research Methodology

My research methodology will include close reading, interpreting and comparing/ contrasting the primary sources chosen for study. Biographical and

historical material, including books on contemporary cultural studies, too will be made use of in order to establish the social and political climate in which the writers live and write. There will also be a psychological as well as socio-cultural re-interpretation of the themes and issues highlighted in the works of Lahiri and Ali.The findings will be supported with critical essays on the broad area of diaspora, especially the emerging theme of 'new migration' and its other diverse and evolving forms. The goal is to focus on research that supports new understandings in the field of Diaspora Studies by investigating the present state of diasporas in relation to colonial histories, unique routes of migration, shifts in the construction of a cultural identity and the presentation of self.

For a better understanding of Diasporic writing, my study will also be focussed not only on the Indian/ South-Asian critics but also on the British colonial histories. The way in which people and their customs were subjectively identified and categorized by British colonials defines the current diasporic bodily and cultural presentations of self. The analysis would thus be based on critical writings such as treaties and agreements, co-judgements and reports, oral narratives, self-narratives, life-writings on the subject of migration, and the like. Therefore, the approach will be interdisciplinary dealing specifically with socio-cultural and historical subjects.

## VII. Tentative Chapterization

### Chap. 1 - Introduction to Diaspora Literature: From Postcolonial to Transnational

The first chapter will focus on the literature produced by the diaspora writers who have explored the problems and possibilities endangered by the experience and understanding of the migration dynamics and a diasporic life.

Amid the rethinking of dual identity and rootlessness, the term diaspora has gained a new framework for re-imagining location and identities, multicultural populations, challenges of transition and re-settlement that involve the movement of people, capital and commodities across national borders.

**Chap. 2 – The Home and the World: Migration and Multiculturalism in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* and *Unaccustomed Earth***

The second chapter will focus on Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* and the short story collection entitled *Unaccustomed Earth*. In the context of diasporic issues, it will elaborate on the aspects of alienation and move on to how migration results in transformation and hope in a globalized, multicultural society, against the backdrop of struggles for social rights, personhood and citizenship.

**Chap. 3 – Location and Identity: Nationality and Mobility in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and *Alentejo Blue***

The third chapter proposes to analyse Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and *Alentejo Blue,* her collection of short-stories. In this chapter, the focus will be on cultural hybridity. Cultural hybridity demands a translation and this is perfectly illustrated through the character of Nazneen, where she gradually begins to explore her surroundings and ends up in assimilating the two cultures in her thereby bringing to the fore newcomers' efforts to retain identity and patterns of culture.

**Chap. 4 – The Taste of Freedom: The Self in Exile in Bharti Kirchner's *Shiva Dancing* and *Darjeeling***

The fourth chapter will examine the plight of women in search of selfhood in Bharti Kirchner's *Shiva Dancing* and *Darjeeling*. In this chapter, the focus will be on the exploration of the nature of women's life and status in society. The well-fortified ideology - supporting the notion of female inferiority - will be examined through the character of Meena in *Shiva Dancing* and through how the characters in *Darjeeling* are haunted by glimpses of memory and exile.

**Chap. 5 – Re-Negotiating Diasporic (Neo-) Identities: A Comparison**

The fourth chapter will examine the style and narrative experimentation in the writings of Lahiri and Ali by attempting a postcolonial and historical reading of their works. While Lahiri is known for the finesse and lyricism of her prose, with the ability to subtly build an emotional connection with her characters, Ali's poignant writing - on the other hand – deftly examines the immigrant's journey of the experience of alienation to eventual assimilation and the formation of a hybrid identity, in the wake of globalism pushing the world, boundaries being contested and localities changing.

**Chap. 6 – Conclusion: Re-Writing the Diaspora Narrative**

The fifth and last chapter will compare and contrast the two novels by analysing the complex and overlapping generational differences among migrants as one of the common phenomena. The chapter will further explore the various ways in which the elusive and unstable concept of diaspora has evolved (as the new mainstream), from communities living in exile, to groups defining their experience in the cultural tensions found between the host land and the homeland and the need for host countries to adjust to shifting shapes of their societies, all in a bid to seek pathways to greater harmony and wellbeing in transitions.

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